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ABSTRACT

Factors that have affected the decline in black college enrollments in the 1980s are explored. Demographics of the teenage cohort during 1973-1983 are reviewed, and attributes of blacks and whites are compared to determine any significant changes among or between the black and white teenage populations that would account for the decline in black college enrollments. Demographic data are highlighted for 18- and 19-year-olds, 15- to 19-year-olds, or populations under 18 for the years 1973, 1978, and 1983. Demographic factors are considered that would indicate social disarray: homicide rates, total arrests, drug violations, and teenage pregnancies for black and white youth. Also assessed are: birthrates, high school graduation rate, curriculum of high school seniors by racial/ethnic group for 1972 and 1980, distribution of active duty forces by service and race/ethnicity, and employment and college attendance of high school graduates for 1977, 1980, and 1983. It was found that the number of black high school graduates has increased during 1978 and 1984, and these graduates appear to be more academically able than in past years. However, black high school graduates are increasingly selecting options other than college after high school. (SW)

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# Research and Development Update

October 1987. Research and Development, The College Board, 45 Columbus Avenue, New York, New York 10023-6992


*Research and Development Update* is an occasional publication devoted to topics of current educational concern. Principal among these concerns is the recent decline in higher education enrollment by black students. My colleague Solomon Arbeiter treats this concern from the market perspective of supply and demand. He examines the choices black students exercise concerning post high school activities and the market forces that compete for the black high school graduate.

The *Updates* provide researchers an opportunity to place data and their interpretation before an interested and concerned audience. Therefore, points of view or opinions expressed do not necessarily represent official College Board policy.

Robert G. Cameron, Executive Director
Research and Development

## ENROLLMENT OF BLACKS IN COLLEGE: IS THE SUPPLY OF BLACK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ADEQUATE? IS THE DEMAND FOR COLLEGE BY BLACKS WEAKENING?


SOLOMON ARBEITER


In a recent article,[1] I explored minority enrollments in higher education during the past decade. What emerged from viewing the data from a variety of perspectives was that during the 1980s the college enrollment of whites had declined, Asian Americans had increased significantly (although from a fairly small base), Hispanics had remained about even, and blacks had declined in almost every enrollment category. Black enrollment, both full time and part time and primarily in four-year colleges, had declined consistently from the high point of enrollment during 1978-80 to 1984 (when preliminary college enrollment data from the Department of Education were released). There were 1,101,000 black students in college in 1980, 1,094,000 in 1982, and 993,600 in 1984 (1984 data are uncorrected; the number may be higher).

It is my purpose in this article to explore a possible macro-cause of the black enrollment decline. I will review the demographics of the teenage cohort over a 10-year period (1973-83) and compare the attributes of blacks and whites to determine if there have been any significant changes among or between the black and white teenage populations that would explain the decline in black college enrollments in the 1980s. Specifically, the article will highlight demographic data for 18- and 19-year-olds, 15-to-19-year-olds, or populations under 18 (depending on how the data are prepared by various government and private agencies) for the years 1973, 1978, and 1983. Viewing comparative data over a 10-year period for black and white teenage students will enable us to evaluate, with a modest degree of accuracy, whether the black college-bound cohort has undergone social changes during the late 1970s and early 1980s and whether this could be a primary cause of the decline in the college enrollments of blacks.[2]

The demographic factors that I will review include many of those that receive the most mention in the press and journals: homicide rates, total arrests, drug violations, and teenage pregnancies for black and white youth—i.e., those factors that would indicate social disarray within a particular population. If it can be shown that these indicators of social malaise have increased within the black community during this 10-year period or that the relative gap between blacks and whites has widened, it may be possible to posit a causal linkage with the decline in black college enrollment. If they have not, other factors will have to be pursued and examined.

### The Demographic Data

Table 1 displays the number of young people 15 to 19 years of age. This age cohort was selected as a base for comparison because many health statistics (birth rates, etc.) and crime statistics (total arrests, etc.) are reported for this age group. It is also useful to view a wide-band teenage/high school cohort as it "smooths-out" year-to-year shifts that may occur

1. "Minority Enrollment in Higher Education Institutions: A Chronological View." *Research and Development Update*, May 1986, College Entrance Examination Board.

2. I would have included Hispanic and Asian Americans in my analysis, but these data either were not available or were available in an unusable form for 1973.

**Table 1. Populations of Youth 15-19 Years Old (Residents including military stationed in United States, excluding youth stationed abroad)**

| | *White youth* | *Black youth* |
|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 17,608,000 | 2,726,000 |
| 1978 | 18,033,000 | 2,982,000 |
| 1983 | 15,861,000 | 2,869,000 |

Source: Ms. Louisa Miller, Census Bureau (phone conversation, summer 1986).

in a single-age cohort—e.g., 18-year-olds. This consistency enables the confident use of these data for developing proportions of the age cohort for each base year: 1973, 1978, and 1983.[3]

Table 1 displays the now-familiar demographic trend for teenagers: an increase in size of the cohort during the early 1970s to a high point in or about 1978—and the beginnings of a 15-year decline expected to culminate in or about 1992. The number of white 15-to-19-year-olds increased by 2.4 percent (425,000) between 1973 and 1978, and declined by 12 percent (2,172,000) between 1978 and 1983. Comparable figures for blacks are an increase of 9.4 percent (256,000) to 1978 and a decrease of 3.8 percent (113,000) to 1983. Both racial groups are in decline (as are most teenage cohorts), but it is a much smaller decline for blacks and other minority groups.

Table 2 displays the number of deaths and the death rate for black and white 15-to-19-year-olds for 1973, 1978, and 1983. Some social commentators attribute a higher and increasing death rate to black teenagers due to violent deaths and other urban ills—and this is often cited as a cause of lower black college enrollments in the 1980s, particularly for black males. However, this view is not supported by the data. Not only has the teenage black death rate been reduced during the 10-year period ending in 1983, but it is currently lower than that for whites. Moreover, the death rate dropped sharply in the period 1978-83, coinciding with the decline in black college enrollments, when it might have been expected to lead to an increase in enrollment. These data are supported modestly by the data in Table 3, which shows black teenage deaths by murder holding constant in the five-year period ending in 1983, although it remained approximately four times higher than that of white teenagers.

Table 4 displays the arrest rate for black and white teenages in 1973, 1978, and 1983. A higher rate of imprisonment for black teenagers, particularly black males, is cited frequently as a cause of lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates for blacks. The data, however, do not support this factor as a cause of declining college enrollments. In all years displayed, the arrest rate for black youth is approximately double that for whites. However, the arrest rate for both whites and blacks has *declined substantially* from the high point in 1978, as have the absolute number of arrests. This trend is confirmed by the data in Table 5, which displays arrests for drug abuse. The drug-related arrest rate dropped by more than half for white youth and by 14 percent for black youth during the period from 1978 to 1983. If increasing imprisonment of, and drug use by, black youth is

3. A colleague has questioned the use of census-based data, claiming that they may not report accurately the status of blacks. Whether or not this is the case, we can assume that whatever errors exist in data collection are consistent over time and reflect accurately trends and changes over a decade.

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**Table 2. Total Deaths by All Causes to Youth 15-19 Years Old**

| | *1973* | *1978* | *1983* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *White youth* | | | |
| Estimated resident population* | 17,608 | 18,033 | 15,861 |
| Number of deaths | 18,872 | 18,034 | 13,025 |
| Death rate** | 107 | 100 | 82.3 |
| *Black youth* | | | |
| Estimated resident population* | 2,726 | 2,982 | 2,869 |
| Number of deaths | 3,658 | 2,760 | 2,304 |
| Death rate** | 134.2 | 92.6 | 80.3 |

*In thousands.

**Rates per 100,000 population. Mortality data derived from the Vital Statistics of the United States and the Monthly Vital Statistics Report series of the National Center for Health Statistics. Estimated population data derived from the Current Population Reports issued by the Bureau of the Census.

**Table 3. Murder Victims Age 15-19 and Proportion of All 15-to-19-Year-Olds**

| | *Total* | *White youth* | *Black youth* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 1,476 | 699 (0.004%) | 758 (0.028%) |
| 1978 | 1,619 | 928 (0.005%) | 659 (0.022%) |
| 1983 | 1,435 | 748 (0.005%) | 657 (0.023%) |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, annual editions.

**Table 4. Total Arrests of Youth under 18 Years Old and Proportion of 15-to-19-Year-Olds**

| | *White youth* | *Black youth* |
|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 1,253,489 (7.1%) | 388,566 (14.3%) |
| 1978 | 1,685,854 (9.4%) | 525,628 (17.6%) |
| 1983 | 1,249,778 (7.9%) | 442,692 (15.4%) |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, annual editions.

**Table 5. Arrests for Drug Abuse Violations for Youth under 18 Years Old and Proportion of 15-to-19-Year-Olds**

| | *White youth* | *Black youth* |
|---|---|---|
| 1973 | 110,402 (0.63%) | 12,393 (0.45%) |
| 1978 | 121,099 (0.67%) | 16,759 (0.56%) |
| 1983 | 56,209 (0.35%) | 14,454 (0.50%) |

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports, annual editions.

sometimes suggested as a cause of declining black enrollment in the 1980s, this is not supported by the data.

An additional cause cited frequently as possibly responsible for the drop in black college enrollment is the exceedingly high, and rising, birthrate for teenage black women—particularly out-of-wedlock births. This is held to be a critical factor, since women constitute a very high proportion of blacks continuing on to college—the highest of any racial/ethnic group. Once again, the data do not support this trend as a contributing factor in the black college enrollment decline in the 1980s.

Table 6 displays birthrates for white and black unmarried women, ages 15-19 years, for the 11-year period ending in 1984. As will be noted, the gap between blacks and whites is very large but narrowing steadily. In 1973 the birthrate for black women was nine times that of whites. Due to a sharply increasing birthrate for white unmarried women and a modestly declining rate for black women, the ratio of the black to white birthrate declined to 6.5 to 1 in 1978, 4.7 to 1 in 1983, and 4.6 to 1 in 1984. The steady rate of births for black teenagers, particularly in the face of a doubling of the birthrate for white teenagers during this period, does not lend support to this factor as a major cause of the black college-enrollment decline during the 1980s.

The trend of improving social characteristics of black teenagers is supported strongly by the increasing proportion of black 18-to-19-year-olds graduating from high school. If, in fact, there had been a deterioration in the social status of black teenagers during the late 1970s and early 1980s, this would be reflected by a declining proportion and declining absolute numbers of blacks graduating from high school in the early and mid-1980s. However, the reverse is true: Both the number of black 18-to-19-year-old high school graduates and the proportion of this age cohort completing high school have increased in the first half of the 1980s.

As displayed in Table 7, the percentage of black 18-to-19-year-olds graduating from high school increased from 55 percent in 1978 to 63 percent in 1983. This is doubly important, as the number of black 18-to-19-year-olds declined modestly during this period, and the improved graduation rate was needed to increase the number of black graduates of this age group from 586,000 in 1978 to 688,000 in 1984. While credit for this improvement may be attributed to government programs to aid disadvantaged youngsters during the 1970s and 1980s and to the increased dedication of

**Table 6. Birthrates for Black and White Unmarried Women 15-19 Years Old***

| | *White* | *Black* |
|---|---|---|
| 1973** | 10.6 | 94.9 |
| 1978** | 13.6 | 87.9 |
| 1983† | 18.5 | 86.4 |
| 1984† | 19.0 | 87.1 |

*Rated are live births to unmarried women per 1,000 unmarried women. Based on 100 percent of births in selected states and on a 50 percent sample of births in other states. Data derived from National Center for Health Statistics, *Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1984. Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 35, No. 4 Supp. DHHS Pub. No. (PHS) 86-1120. Public Health Service, Hyattsville, Maryland, July 18, 1986.

**Estimated.

†Reported and/or inferred.

**Table 7. High School Graduates and College Enrollments of 18- and 19-Year-Olds: October 1973 to October 1984 (in thousands)**

| | *1973* | *1978* | *1984* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *White* | | | |
| High school graduates | 5,029 | 5,391 | 4,632 |
| As percentage of total | 76.7% | 76.3% | 75.5% |
| Enrolled in college | 2,281 | 2,553 | 2,541 |
| As percentage of high school graduates | 45.4% | 48.3% | 54.9% |
| *Black* | | | |
| High school graduates | 563 | 586 | 688 |
| As percentage of total | 56.5% | 55% | 63% |
| Enrolled in college | 194 | 270 | 265 |
| As percentage of high school graduates | 34.5% | 46.1% | 38.5% |

Source: Current Population Reports, *Population Characteristics: Social and Economic Characteristics of Students*. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C., 1973, 1978, and 1984.

school districts and teachers to improve learning, it is difficult to conceive that it could have occurred without concurrent stability or improvement in the condition of the black family.

At a slightly greater level of detail, a question has been raised concerning the type of high school diploma received by blacks. If there had been a shift away from academic diplomas to vocational and general diplomas, then this might partially explain the drift away from college (and to the business sector) for a proportion of black high school graduates. To explore this possibility, we[4] reviewed data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS) and the "High School and Beyond" base-year survey of 1980 high school seniors (HSB) (see Table 8 below).

4. I am grateful for the collegial assistance of Alan Wagner, State University of New York, Albany, in obtaining these data.

**Table 8. Curriculum of High School Seniors by Racial/Ethnic Group: 1972 and 1980**

| | *White* | | *Black* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *1972* | *1980* | *1972* | *1980* |
| General | 32.3% | 37.1% | 35.8% | 35.0% |
| Academic | 45.9 | 41.7 | 32.8 | 34.2 |
| Vocational | 21.8 | 21.2 | 31.5 | 30.8 |

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS); High School and Beyond (HSB) base-year survey of 1980 high school seniors.

As will be noted, between 1972 and 1980, the proportion of white students in academic programs declined by over 4 points, while the proportion of blacks increased by 1.4 points. There is, therefore, no evidence in these data that black high school graduates have drifted away from academic programs. Rather, when viewed along with data from the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test registration questionnaire (the Student Descriptive Questionnaire), which reports increasing years of academic study in high school by black test takers in the 1980s,[5] there is reason to maintain that black high school graduates are better prepared academically than at any previous time.

It might be helpful to turn now to determining where black high school graduates are choosing to go, if not to college. In analyzing the choices of black students, we may be able to speculate on the reasons for such choices and offer some guidance to colleges in the recruitment of black students.

### Competition for High School Graduates

If one accepts the analyses above and discounts the changes in the black teenage cohort as a primary cause of declining black enrollments in college, there remain two rather broad causes: (1) black high school graduates are increasingly selecting the work force, the military, or noncollegiate postsecondary education, and (2) blacks are entering college at a steady rate but are dropping out or stopping out in ever larger numbers. With regard to the second cause, there are no hard data regarding the black attrition rate in college, but there is also no evidence available to suggest that it has increased during the 1980s. What we do know with a degree of assurance (as displayed in Table 7) is that the number *and* proportion of black high school graduates enrolling in college has *declined* steadily during the 1980s. The sharpest decline occurred from 1978 to 1984 in the *proportion* of 18-to-19-year-old graduates moving to college, a decrease of 16.5 percent (46.1 percent to 38.5 percent). The same period witnessed a decline of only 5,000 black 18-to-19-year-old high school graduates enrolling in college (270,000 to 265,000), but it will be noted that in the previous five-year period black enrollments had increased 39.1 percent (from 194,000 to 270,000). Thus it is clear that during the 1980s large numbers of black high school graduates are choosing to enter the armed services, business and industry, or noncollegiate postsecondary schools rather than to continue their education in college. Maintaining the 46 percent rate of black high school graduates entering college in 1978 would have resulted in 316,480 blacks enrolling in college in 1984—an addition of 51,480 to the actual 265,000.

### The Armed Services

The military enlistments of blacks are relatively easy to substantiate: the armed services maintain current and very good records on enlistments by race, and Table 9 displays the distribution of active duty forces by service and racial/ethnic group for the years 1980, 1984, and 1986. (I have included "Spanish" servicemen in this listing as a point of reference from which to view the increase in black servicemen.) As will be noted, black participation in the armed services has increased during the 1980s, moving from slightly under 400,000 to slightly over 410,000. More important, this has occurred despite a decline of approximately 20,000 black servicemen in the Army, the military service branch that traditionally has the highest proportion of blacks. This decline of black soldiers, however, has been more than offset by an increase in the more "prestigious" branches of service, the Navy and Air Force. The Navy increased the number of black sailors by approximately 20,000, and the Air Force increased the number of black airmen by approximately 12,000 during this six-year period.

Of immediate concern for this article is the fact that the proportion of high school graduates recruited by the Air Force and the Navy is about the highest for the military services, averaging in the 90 percent range. Therefore, to maintain and increase the proportion of black sailors and airmen, the two branches must have recruited a high proportion of black high school graduates during the 1980s, both to increase the total number of black servicemen *and* to replace black servicemen who retired.

The data on total staffing of the military and the increase in black servicemen are supported by the data on new recruits, or, in military terminology, "accessions." "About 26 percent of new recruits in 1985 were minorities . . . and 29 percent of applicants were minorities. The percentage of accessions categorized as racial or ethnic minorities has been roughly constant since fiscal year 1981."[6] In specific numbers for 1985, the armed services had 686,283 applicants (an applicant is an individual sufficiently interested in the military services to take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) and 294,416 new recruits in the mainland United States. In 1985, 73,898 recruits were minority and 53,878 were black (18.3 percent). The proportion of en-

5. See Ramist and Arbeiter, *Profiles, College-Bound Seniors, 1985* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1986).

6. All data on new recruits for the military are obtained from *Population Representation in the Active Duty Military Services, Fiscal Year 1985*, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management and Personnel), June 1986, page 49.

**Table 9. Distribution of Active Duty Forces by Service and Race/Ethnicity**

| | *Total* | *Black* | *%* | *Spanish* | *%* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *September 1986* | | | | | |
| Army | 777,596 | 208,651 | 26.8 | 28,007 | 3.6 |
| Navy | 576,420 | 73,912 | 12.8 | 21,936 | 3.8 |
| Marines | 198,860 | 37,635 | 18.9 | 9,578 | 4.8 |
| Air Force | 603,717 | 90,703 | 15.0 | 20,592 | 3.4 |
| Total | 2,156,593 | 410,901 | 19.1 | 80,113 | 3.7 |
| *September 1984* | | | | | |
| Army | 775,728 | 213,625 | 27.5 | 28,035 | 3.6 |
| Navy | 558,745 | 66,233 | 11.9 | 18,480 | 3.3 |
| Marines | 196,284 | 35,926 | 18.3 | 8,923 | 4.5 |
| Air Force | 592,671 | 87,295 | 14.7 | 20,923 | 3.5 |
| Total | 2,123,428 | 403,079 | 19.0 | 76,361 | 3.6 |
| *September 1980* | | | | | |
| Army | 772,376 | 228,476 | 29.6 | 30,576 | 4.0 |
| Navy | 521,710 | 54,189 | 10.4 | 13,701 | 2.6 |
| Marines | 188,483 | 38,855 | 20.6 | 10,368 | 5.5 |
| Air Force | 554,103 | 78,209 | 14.1 | 19,037 | 3.4 |
| Total | 2,036,672 | 399,729 | 19.6 | 73,682 | 3.6 |

Data generously supplied by Peter L. Wyro, Major, ARNG, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), U.S. Department of Defense.

listed accessions who are black has declined from its high point in 1979 of 26 percent, and this is attributable largely to the decline in the proportion of blacks recruited by the Army (36.8 percent to 22.6 percent) and the Marine Corps (27.5 percent to 18.5 percent) during this period.

However, the proportion of new recruits *with high school diplomas* has grown vigorously from 1980 to 1985—and this growth has increased the number of black high school graduates entering the armed services. The proportion of enlisted accessions with high school diplomas has risen from its recent low point in 1980 (67.7 percent) to its near-high of 92.7 percent in 1985. Assuming new recruits were 295,000 in 1980 and that blacks approximated the high school graduate rate for new accessions in both 1980 and 1985, the number of black enlisted accessions with diplomas in 1980 was 44,137 (295,000 × 22.1 percent black × 67.7 percent high school graduates) and 50,444 in 1985 (295,000 × 18.3 percent black × 92.7 percent high school graduates)—an increase of over 6,000 enlistments from the pool of black high school graduates. This annual increase in the number of black enlistees who are high school graduates, if attracted to college, would more than offset the approximate annual decline of 5,000 black college enrollees noted in Table 7 and would restore a sizable portion of black college students who have constituted the decline in the 1980s.

### Vocational and Technical Schools

Common wisdom would assign a portion of the decline in minority and black enrollments in college to increased attendance by minority students at vocational and technical proprietary schools. This factor may be blown somewhat out of proportion by the fact that certain proprietary school students *are* represented in the college enrollment data collected by the Center for Education Statistics. Approximately 175,000 of the more than 12 million students reported as enrolled in postsecondary education are attending proprietary vocational and technical schools accredited by the major proprietary school membership and accrediting associations—e.g., the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools, the Association of Independent Colleges and Schools. Therefore, the increase in enrollments, particularly minority enrollments, attributed to these institutions *is* partially reflected in the enrollment data.

However, it may be true that many minority students are being increasingly attracted to vocational and technical schools that are *not* accredited—and would not be reported by the Center for Education Statistics. It is interesting to take note of one of the few sources of data available for proprietary school enrollments, by race. (There are very little data regarding proprietary school enrollments, over time, by race.) These data, shown in Table 10, are available from the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Authority and relate to student enrollments in the state of Pennsylvania.[7] They reveal a steady and significant increase in the number and proportion of black students enrolling as full-time, first-time freshmen in Pennsylvania proprietary schools.

For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to note that the postsecondary institutions in Pennsylvania that offer direct training for jobs and careers have proved increasingly attractive to black students during the decade of the 1980s and will undoubtedly continue to do so as long as this student group values education and training that lead to jobs. It may prove difficult for many colleges, particularly four-year, liberal arts institutions, to compete effectively for this student population.

**Table 10. Black Students Enrolling Full-Time as First-Time Freshmen in Pennsylvania Postsecondary Education Institutions**

| | *Total black full-time, first-time* | *Proprietary black full-time, first-time* | *% of black full-time, first-time, proprietary* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1976 | 7,129 | 496 | 7 |
| 1980 | 7,853 | 1,015 | 12.9 |
| 1984 | 7,185 | 1,353 | 18.8 |

7. Data were generously made available by Jerry Davis, director of research, Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Authority.

### Business and Industry

The data in Table 11 (obtained from the Current Population Survey of the Bureau of the Census) for high school graduates do reveal an increasing number and proportion of blacks entering the labor force. In 1980, 149,000 black graduates entered the labor force. This increased to 183,000 in 1983—up by 23 percent. The reverse is true for whites: 971,000 graduates entered the labor force in 1983 compared to 1,173,000 in 1980—a decrease of 17 percent. Of course, a significant amount of the decline in whites is explained by a lower number of graduates. However, blacks are also encountering greater success in finding jobs than their white counterparts, with stable employment rates between 1980 and 1983 compared to a declining rate for white graduates. The proportion of blacks unemployed, however, remains significantly higher than (nearly triple) that for recent white high school graduates.

### Observations

It is trite to state that blacks in America vary greatly in their composition and outlook; so do whites and Asian Americans. It is, however, useful in gaining perspective to make note of the size of the black community in America. As indicated in a recent book,[8] "blacks in the United States are a diverse group, larger than the total population of Argentina, Australia, Canada, South Africa, or Yugoslavia. No simple generalization can adequately describe racial trends. . . ." It is helpful, however, to compare the progress and attainment of blacks, whites, and other ethnic minorities as distinct groups, in order to facilitate program development or institutional change as part of a move toward parity for all groups. Individual critics and social commentators can, according to their inclination, approach the black community in America and find progress or deterioriation, gains or slippages.

From the data I have reviewed for this and previous papers and articles, I observe primarily progress on the part of black Americans and, therefore, progress for American society as a whole. This is no cause for self-congratulation or a cessation of efforts to assure full equality for all racial minorities. The fact that many blacks continue to show improvement as measured by common social indicators does, however, speak to the success of efforts by the black community and many of the major institutions in America (e.g., business and industry, government, schools and colleges).

The observant reader will now question: "What about college enrollments? Isn't the number of black students declining in recent years—and doesn't this indicate a setback for black aspirations?" The concern is well placed and merits an answer that has at least three parts.

8. Reynolds Farley, *Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

**Table 11. Employment and College Enrollment of Current-Year High School Graduates (in Thousands)**

| | *1977* | *1980* | *1983* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *White high school graduates* | 2,765 | 2,678 | 2,496 |
| Enrolled in college | 1,403 | 1,339 | 1,372 |
| As percentage of high school graduates | 50.7% | 50.0% | 55.0% |
| Not in college | 1,365 | 1,343 | 1,124 |
| In labor force | 1,184 | 1,173 | 971 |
| Participation rate | 86.7% | 87.3% | 86.4% |
| Employed | 1,029 | 999 | 785 |
| Unemployment rate | 13.1% | 14.8% | 19.2% |
| Percentage employed | 75.4% | 74.4% | 69.8% |
| *Black high school graduates* | 330 | 354 | 392 |
| Enrolled in college | 166 | 151 | 151 |
| As percentage of high school graduates | 50.3% | 42.6% | 38.5% |
| Not in college | 169 | 210 | 241 |
| In labor force | 126 | 149 | 183 |
| Participation rate | 74.6% | 71.0% | 75.9% |
| Employed | 73 | 73 | 84 |
| Unemployment rate | 42.1% | 51.0% | 54.1% |
| Percentage employed | 43.2% | 34.8% | 34.8% |

■ 1. The educational attainment of blacks should certainly be measured, in part, by college attendance and graduation rates. Of greater importance, however, is the *high school graduation rate* and, as noted above, this has risen consistently during the past decades. Let us recall the primary difference between secondary and postsecondary education (aside from the more advanced level of study): the fact that attendance in secondary school is mandatory up to the age of 16 or 17, while college attendance is optional. I do not intend to belabor the obvious, but it strikes me as more important that blacks, other minorities, and whites complete successfully their *mandatory* schooling and then exercise their options with regard to future education or work. It is the clearest of failures if our society forces young people into school for a 10-to-12-year period and fails to offer them a basic education and functional civic, mathematical, and verbal literacy.

■ 2. Is college attendance an unmitigated good? We can measure progress within groups by noting improvements in the arrest rate or the drug-use rate by various teenage cohorts and feel confident that matters are improving when the rate declines. However, a decline in college enrollment may not be an important measure of lack of progress. Higher education is not so much a question of numbers and quantity as a question of quality and the improvement of life-style. I do

not mean to imply that higher education should not be, and could not be, and is not, as valuable for blacks as it is for whites and other minorities, but I do maintain that it is a choice of the black community whether to select college or other learning options beyond high school, and that choices other than college are not necessarily less valuable or indicative of a decline in status by the black community. Stated succinctly, the number of blacks or other racial and ethnic groups enrolled in college should not be viewed as a *vital indicator* of social or economic progress.

The investment of time and money in a college education should be measured carefully by all students and their families. It may be that such evaluation by segments of the black community is leading to other choices for learning that have economic value and serve well their career and social needs. To select alternative postsecondary learning and work options does not foreclose a return to college at a later date. Nor does it indicate a failure on the part of the colleges or the black community, but rather a modest affirmation of the growing diversity of options for learning beyond high school.

■ 3. College administrators and faculty do, however, have to make a choice regarding the admission and matriculation of a greater number of students from a wider segment of the black, minority, and low-income communities. The choice is between returning to an earlier mission of providing students a general education or preparing students for specific careers and vocations. The decision, as I see it, lies between responding to increasing calls for a return to a liberal arts education and "critical-thinking skills" or continuing to offer students what they appear to be seeking through their enrollment decisions—i.e., a foothold on the economic ladder through studies in such areas as business administration, computer sciences, engineering, and other fields important to our postindustrial society.

The trend toward military enlistment and proprietary school enrollment, as evidenced by the data displayed above, would indicate that black students in particular wish to attain first the skills and credentials needed to succeed in our current and future work force. These young people may be interested in attaining a liberal education, but that is often being deferred until the crucial job and work skills are obtained and certified. If colleges, particularly four-year colleges, shift back to a broad liberal arts curriculum with no direct entry relationship to the workplace, I believe that an increasing number of black and Hispanic students seeking a place on the economic ladder will opt for more job-relevant and short-term educational programs after completing high school. One of the few ways this can be offset is if American business and industry, when recruiting on campus for employees, interview (and then hire) English, sociology, and history majors in the same proportion and at the same salary level that they hire engineering and computer science students. Until then, those colleges that emphasize liberal arts education may find themselves less attractive to black and minority students.

To conclude, this article views the college enrollment of blacks from a narrow market perspective of supply and demand. Has the supply of black teenagers and high school graduates declined, remained constant, or increased during the late 1970s and early 1980s? A decline would help explain the decline in black college enrollment during this period. However, the number of black high school graduates has increased during 1978 and 1984, and these graduates appear to be more academically able than in past years.

This leaves the question of the demand by blacks for a college education—and this is clearly weakening. As consumers, black high school graduates are increasingly selecting other options beyond high school. The reasons for this shift in consumer preference are being, and will continue to be, debated and discussed. But the fact remains that blacks' demand for higher education can be increased only in the traditional manner of open markets: lower the price (or, in the case of college costs, increase the subsidy) and/or increase the value or attractiveness of the product or service. It is hoped that this article will stimulate discussion about increasing the value of higher education for black students.